

Buxton, Iowa 1900 -1944

A Unique Coal Mining Town

Bob Guthrie

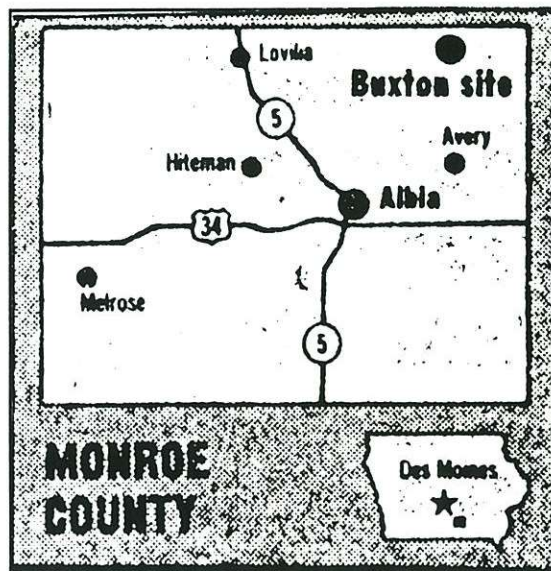
This is the story of a coal mining camp that existed in Iowa in the early 1900's, with unique sociologic and industrial characteristics. Buxton has drawn the attention of a number of historians, anthropologists, mining engineers and other scholars over the past five decades resulting in several articles, books, a TV program and an archaeological exploration.

How and why did Buxton develop? We all think of the coal mining giants of Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia but fail to remember Iowa's importance in the early years of the coal industry. This was a time of immigration to the United States and exploration and settlement of the Western portion of our country. From 1870 to 1920, the population of the U.S. exploded to 26, 277,000 people — more than three times its growth during the previous 250 years. Iowa experienced a fifty fold increase in its population, reaching nearly 2 1/2 million.

The mass movement in settling of immigrants and the transportation of their commodities became complementary functions. The hundreds of locomotives pressed into service, especially the low efficiency varieties of the 1880's and 1890's, were voracious consumers of fuel. Iowa sat at the western edge of this expansion and became the last source of coal before locomotives started across

the Great Plains for the West. Most major railroad systems operated captive mines or contracted directly with private producers for large tonnage of coal.

In 1860 Iowa had only 500 miles of track. The spread to the Missouri flourished after the Civil War and



Location of Buxton, Bluff Creek Township, Monroe County Iowa.

several major lines and many branches developed creating a great need for fuel. The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad, (CNRR) one of the largest in Iowa, had 1520 miles of track by 1890. Iowa's coal production rose to 3.9 million tons in that year. The CNRR's source of fuel was the Consolidation Coal Company which it owned.

During the 1850's there was a prolif-

eration of independent small coal companies throughout south central Iowa around Albia, Ottumwa (Hardsocg Mfg. Co.) and Oskaloosa. Mahaska County became the largest coal producing county in the state, with an annual output of over one million tons by 1880. The Chicago and Northwestern opened a spur to the north from the town of Muchakinock in Mahaska County to another familiar town, What Cheer, Iowa (What Cheer Mining Tool Company). Recognizing their dependency on coal the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad bought the Muchakinock mines for \$500,000.00 and named J.E. Buxton Superintendent of the Consolidation Coal Company.

In order to break a strike that had idled the mines from 1878—1881, the Company recruited Negro laborers from Virginia and other southern states. The recruitment proved successful and nine different shafts and slopes developed around Muchakinock. Gradually, the output and production faltered and in 1900 the railroad purchased 8,000 acres in Monroe County and the entire population abandoned Muchakinock and moved to the woods and hills of Section 4 of Bluff Creek Township and established the new town named after their Superintendent, J.E. Buxton.

According to Dorothy Schweider, a



Some of the residents of Buxton.

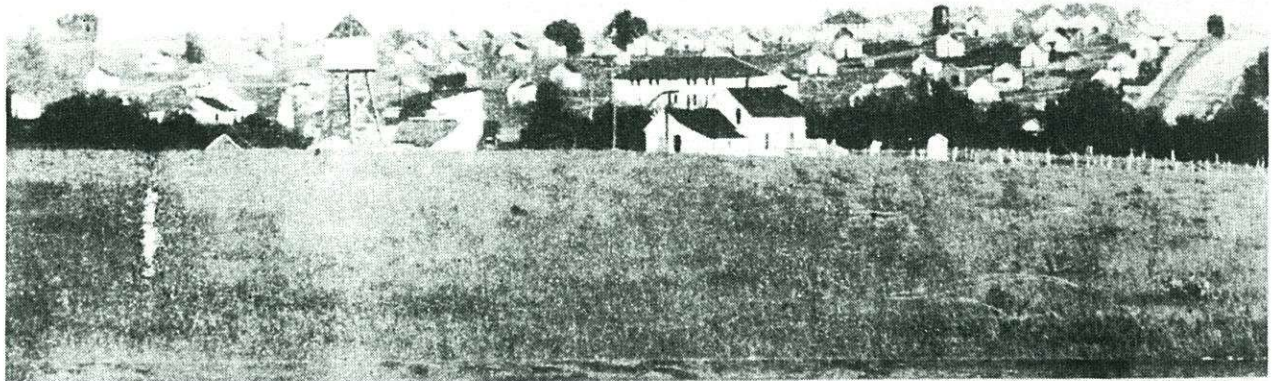
professor of history at Iowa State University, the average life of an Iowa coal town was about 8 years. Most towns developed close to the mines in a helter-skelter fashion because of a lack of transportation to get miners to and from their work. Buxton was to have a network of trains and a service to transport miners to the coal shafts and slopes. Whether it was this transportation, the thickness of the coal seams, the benevolence and progressiveness of the Company or a combination of these factors, the Consolidation Coal Company decided to develop Buxton "right." From census figures it appears Buxton grew to about 6,000 people but some estimates run as

high as 12,000. The apparent inaccuracy was due to the fact that Buxton was never incorporated. Over half of the residents were black. The presence of this number of blacks was in sharp contrast to other coal towns and the State itself, which had a small black population.

Ben Buxton, J.E.'s son and successor hired well known architect Frank Wethorell to design the houses. The houses were owned by the company and rented to the miners. Each house was a comfortable 5 or 6 rooms and located on 1/4 acre, allowing room for a yard and garden. One former resident described her house as being carpeted which "wasn't unusual."

Soon three 4-room school buildings were completed and staffed with 12 competent teachers, several black. The children were expected to attend school and many went on to high school in Albia or Des Moines. Within ten years a high school was built allowing the children to complete their schooling in Buxton.

In 1903, the Company constructed the first and largest Industrial YMCA in the United States. This became the center of social and recreational activities in Buxton. Separate facilities existed for children and adults but these facilities were available to all the residents of Buxton, black or white. Lodge meetings were held in



2592 Bird's Eye View, Buxton, Iowa.

Bird's eye view, Buxton, Iowa.

the YMCA and appeared to be one of the segregated activities. A large auditorium (1,000 seats) was a venue for many famous speakers and entertainers. Booker T. Washington once spoke to a packed house. The building was steam heated and had electricity from the town's own generator.

Not far from the YMCA was the Monroe Mercantile Store owned by Consolidation. One hundred thirty-five clerks were needed to run the full service department store. Though company owned, the miners were not required or coerced to shop here. The Buxton business district had res-

taurants, a bank, several meat markets, a lumber yard, bakeries, two general stores, a drug store, undertaking services, an underground railroad service, beauty parlors and barber shops, livery stables and a hotel. Several of the businesses were owned by blacks. Buxton at its height was abundant with Negro professionals. There were doctors, lawyers, teachers, businessmen, ministers, a pharmacist, undertakers, and a Justice of the Peace. During the life of Buxton, there were three weekly newspapers published at different times.

The pride of Buxton was its baseball team known widely as the "Buxton

Wonders." They challenged visiting teams from Chicago, St. Paul, Kansas City and any other team that wished to try their luck at beating the "Wonders." One author theorized that many of these players could have played with Jackie Robinson had the color barrier of baseball been broken at that time.

Music was also an important part of the daily life of Buxton. The Buxton Negro Concert Band with fifty musicians had numerous engagements around the state, the heart of the band was in their home town where they played for weddings, dances, baseball games, and any other event that



The pride of Buxton - "The Wonders".

called for music! Music also found its way into the homes, with children being brought up with a piano or other musical instrument in the house.

To say Buxton was a place of racial harmony is probably an overstatement. One must also consider this in the context of the times (early 1900's). Blacks and whites seemed to have had a different perception of integration. They attended the same movies, YMCA activities, etc., but there were notable divisions of churches and lodges. Interviews conducted for a TV documentary in 1979 with former residents, both

black and white, noted the *lack* of segregation. Considering that this time following the Civil War was probably the nadir for fair treatment of the American Negro, Buxton was indeed an enlightened community. A former black resident summarized some of the reasons: "They all knew each other, worked the same place for the same pay, and lived in houses built to the same specifications." In Buxton, she said, we had "all white affairs, all colored affairs, and all all affairs." Many of the blacks in Buxton related that they did not experience prejudice or segregation until they moved to other cities and

towns where blacks were a minority.

Mr. George Woodson, a black Buxton attorney, became the Republican nominee for the county's seat in the Iowa House of Representatives in 1912. He defeated two white candidates in the June primary election in a county that registered a majority of white voters. He was the first black so honored by either political party in Iowa.

In a 1916 report to the Governor, Rhys T. Rhys, mine inspector for the second mining district of Iowa, editorialized about how mining life was

often misunderstood and miners regarded as vagabonds, when they actually had a strong desire for permanence and a home they could call their own where they could raise and educate their children. Rhys continued that any employer who fails to recognize these desires was blind to his *own* interests. Though he didn't mention Buxton specifically, he may have been thinking how far this community had come in avoiding the usual characteristics of a mining camp.

By the end of the second decade of the 1900's, the inevitable began to happen to Buxton. The coal in the mines was nearly gone and production lessened. Mines #18 and #19 were opened further south of Buxton and soon towns grew up there in Haydoc and Bucknell. By 1925 only Mines #18 and #19 were operational. Mine #20 was planned but would never open. Many miners found themselves idle and businesses began to close. The railroads had begun to switch from coal to diesel fuel, adding to the demise. On March 15, 1927 Mine #18 was closed. The final blow came just 15 days later when a strike was declared at Mine #19. The miners never returned and two years later there were still a hundred cars loaded with coal waiting to be hoisted — and never were!! The population drifted away, businesses closed and buildings were torn down. The houses were sold for \$50.00 each.

In 1944, the Hercules Powder Company set twelve pounds of dynamite at the base of the 155 foot stack of Mine #18. With a terrible roar the big mine was leveled, the concrete and steel used to seal the shaft and the last remains of what was Buxton settled into the earth. An archaeological exploration of the site of Buxton conducted by a team from Iowa State

University turned up a single mining artifact — a Justrite carbide lamp bottom. Today, though all of the buildings are gone, former residents and their descendents meet monthly at a church on the east side of Des Moines as the Buxton, Iowa Club Inc., to remember the times that were — Buxton, Iowa, 1900—1944.

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All photos courtesy of Dorothy Schwieder, Prof. of History, I.S.U, Ames, Iowa.